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For Immediate Release

MCHD and WVABCA issue citations after visiting bars this weekend

MORGANTOWN, WV (Sept. 2, 2020) — Two Monongalia County Health Department registered sanitarians spent an evening on the town this past weekend, along with five agents from the West Virginia Alcohol and Beverage Control Administration (WVABCA), a West Virginia State Police corporal and three troopers as well as representatives from Morgantown Police and the city's Fire Marshal division to make sure bars were not serving alcohol without food and adhering to other COVID-19 guidance.

"This team found some common violations among several establishments," said Dr. Lee B. Smith, MCHD executive director and county health officer. "Some citations were issued and we had the opportunity to go over guidance with these business owners so they could run their establishments more safely. We are all in this together and having rising numbers of COVID-19 will have a negative impact on us all."

The group visited 17 establishments. Monongalia County Health Department issued violations at seven of them for infractions including a lack of social distancing, not wearing face coverings, overcrowding and for patrons drinking alcohol without ordering or consuming food.

One health department violation requires a follow-up hearing; another was easily fixed by placing a sign about wearing face coverings at the entrance.

In addition, one team of troopers issued three uniform citations for obstructions of the Governor's Mandate; another issued four. All were COVID-19-related, except for one that was for underage drinking. And one bar that was open with patrons inside had locked the front door and was issued a citation by a city fire marshal.

Seven establishments were issued 10-day notices, meaning that a registered sanitarian will follow up within 10 days to make sure problems have been corrected.

“These were all COVID-based violations,” said Jennifer Costolo-Michael, MCHD Environmental Health registered sanitarian. “These were issued when there was just overwhelming evidence of no mask wearing and overcrowding – public health concerns that could lead to the spread of COVID-19.”

On July 1, MCHD issued a press release noting that several individuals who had visited bars downtown had tested positive for COVID-19. This was one contributing factor to a COVID-19 surge in which Monongalia County went from having 162 cases of the virus on June 30 to 100 new cases in the first five days of July, a nearly 68 percent increase.

As of Tuesday morning, Monongalia County had 1,170 positive cases since the beginning of the pandemic in mid-March.

Additionally, Gov. Jim Justice closed bars in Monongalia County, an order that also meant that patrons could not go to a restaurant and just order alcohol without any food. The order went into effect July 13 and was extended until midnight Monday, Aug. 31.

WVABC Commissioner Fred Wooton said, “During these uncertain and difficult times, the WVABC recognizes the challenges and financial hardships placed on the food and beverage industry. It is critical we all pull together to defeat this global pandemic and reduce the spread of COVID-19. WVABC licensed businesses are expected to do their part.”

Bars were allowed to reopen on Monday, Aug. 31 with guidance from the governor’s office designed to make them safer. That guidance can be found on the governor’s website as well as at <https://www.monchd.org/covid-19-guidance.html>.

Protocols include strictly enforcing 50% capacity and denying entrance to anyone under the age of 21; closing and restricting access to dance floors and prohibiting any live performance or entertainment.

Costolo-Michael also noted that many bars were closed during the time of the checks and that there were not a lot of people out.

Said Dr. Smith: “MCHD is pleased that several of the establishments were following the guidelines,” he said. “We look forward to this opportunity to work with local businesses while keeping the community safe.”

For up-to-date information on health and wellness in Monongalia County, check out monchd.org and follow the health department on Facebook and Twitter @WVMCHD and on Instagram at #wvmchd.

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